

## Editor's Preface

PETER BUSCH

*Villanova University*  
*peter.busch@villanova.edu*

Perhaps no portrait of modernity is so dark yet so funny as Charlie Chaplin's masterpiece, *Modern Times*. In the opening scenes, Chaplin is a hapless factory worker who turns an endless series of identical screws on a conveyor belt with no discernable purpose. One day he is chosen to be the test subject for an invention that will eliminate inefficient lunch breaks by feeding the workers automatically. After that experiment ends in a messy failure, an increasingly erratic Chaplin tussles with his foreman and lies down on the belt, entering the gaping mouth of an enormous machine and winding around its mighty gears like a half-digested sandwich. Like Shakespeare's Polonius, he goes not where he eats, but where he is eaten.

## Rediscovering Enchantment

But if modernity first appears as a machine that devours the human beings it was meant to serve, its portrait in the rest of the movie may be more promising. Chaplin falls in love with an orphan girl whom he has saved from the police, and together they bravely join in the modern pursuit of happiness. Returning to work as a night watchman in a department store, he dances backwards and blindfolded on roller skates, unaware that every turn brings him within inches of falling into a precipice that he somehow, miraculously, avoids. Later, he goes to work in a mill, and this time a worker who gets stuck inside the machine does get to eat his lunch—as he is fed by Chaplin himself. The movie enters the new age of “talkie” technology when Chaplin sings a nonsensical but definitely naughty song. In these moments, the soulless mechanism of modernity is transformed, if only briefly, by the beauty of romantic love, dance, compassion, song, comedy, and wonder. While it is a commonplace to describe our world as “disenchanted,” we are thus led to

consider whether some enchantment does not remain in our lives.

What is it that we glimpse in Chaplin's story? Can enchantment find a home in modern times? What exactly is the power of poetry, music, and beauty in our souls? Can enchantment be understood philosophically? Is it rather (or also) a variety of religious experience? What must be true if enchantment is to bring the happiness that it promises? These are some of the questions that we will be investigating in our themed issue this spring.

### **Articles in this Issue**

Our first article, by James Wetzel, argues that modernity is in fact defined by its resistance to enchantment, and specifically to what modern philosophers regard as the hocus-pocus of religion. "The mark of the modern in philosophy," Wetzel maintains, "is a skeptical disposition, directed especially towards alleged revelations of what is good or right." For Wetzel, this skepticism has resulted in our ongoing quarrels over whether to side with reason or imagination, will or vision, altruism or self-interest. Wetzel proposes that these divisions are not so necessary as they might seem; they are avoided in advance, he argues, by an Augustinian-Platonic understanding that draws no stark distinction between philosophy and religion because it understands the Good as the one, true God.

Is it possible to revive Platonic notions of beauty without embracing the pre-modern theism of Augustine? We can examine this alternative in the nineteenth-century classicist and historian of culture, Walter Pater. Our second article, by Gerald Monsman, presents Pater's understanding of beauty as an aesthetic experience that links the sensuous with the spiritual and exerts its power at the turning points of history and culture. Monsman illustrates his reading with "Tibalt the Albigenese," a fragment by Pater that is published here for the first time.

Our third article turns to an account of enchantment more in keeping with Wetzel's call for renewed seriousness about religion. Instead of reuniting theism with philosophy, however, Stephen Little reunites theism with poetry. Little interprets Canto 26 of *Paradiso* as ascribing to Dante the poet a prophetic vision of God that recalls the revelations of Isaiah, Paul, and John in the Bible.

Perhaps, however, artistic expression offers an enchantment all its own, apart from all claims to prophecy? In our fourth article, "What Has Mozart to Do with Coltrane?" Cynthia R. Nielsen explores the wonders of innovation and improvisation to be found in the world of music.

## Other Features

This spring marks the return of "Notes, Insights, and Flashes." Bernard G. Prusak examines the famous argument in *Confessions* that evil, strictly speaking, does not exist, and he finds Augustine's argument to be something less than persuasive. This philosophic (not to say skeptical) reading was so provocative as to inspire a much longer critical response from an Augustine scholar, Jonathan P. Yates. Such conversations are exactly what we hope to accomplish with this feature, and so we are publishing the entire exchange, including Prusak's reply to his critic.

If modernity is defined by its skepticism concerning religion, as Wetzel maintains, how should this remarkable process of disenchantment be understood? What are its causes and implications, beyond the academic discipline of philosophy? Distinguished political theorist Charles Taylor has taken up this question in *A Secular Age*. Micah J. Watson and Bruce Ledewitz discuss Taylor's book in our Academic Roundtable.

Our book reviews include two review essays. In the first, Nicholas Popper discusses Quentin Skinner's *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* as well as his longstanding and influential practice of studying authors by situating them within their social and historical context. In the second essay, David Schalkwyk reviews two recent books in which Shakespeare is read as a philosophic thinker. To what extent does such an approach reveal what is most profound in the plays?

## Dawn

If we turn to the end of Chaplin's movie hoping to learn the fate of enchantment in modern times, what we find is deeply ambiguous. Having escaped from yet another disaster, apparently by running all night,

Chaplin and the girl now sit on the side of the road, exhausted. She has been wrapping a loaf of bread in a kerchief to carry on his cane, but now she breaks down, sobbing, “What’s the use of trying?” Chaplin’s earnest response, “Buck up—never say die. We’ll get along!” restores her spirits, and the two of them set off towards the rising sun. Their path is a modern road, but they are headed for the hills, to the countryside rather than the city. It is unclear, therefore, whether happiness is to be found in modernity as they have known it, or whether it would require them to be unmodern, or at least differently modern. One way or the other, the two of them believe they see their happiness ahead, and only the most intransigent skeptic would insist that they are wrong.